History and Christianity

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Modern man overestimates the significance of history within the totality of reality because he has lost the sense of human nature within nature at large. The natural universe of which we are a strange part is irreducible to universal history, for world history is never identical with the world. The term *Weltgeschichte* is the presumptuous result of modern historical thinking; and, if taken literally, it is a misconception of the universe, for the universality of history concerns only our historical world. The history of human civilization is something vanishing within the totality of the world. The historical world may or may not have a meaning and purpose; the quest for meaning and purpose is only meaningful if restricted to that which is conditioned and contrived by the purpose of a human or divine will.

If history has to be defined by and delimited to man's willful enterprise, the question about its meaning is in itself historically conditioned. It is a specifically Western concern which presupposes that history has a purpose as *telos* and *finis*. This belief in a final purpose has originated from the faith in the purposeful will of God with regard to his creation. With the secularization of the Christian theologies of history to the modern philosophies of history, the will of God became replaced by the will of man and divine Providence by human prevision. The possibility of a philosophy of history rests on secularized eschatology.

Neither classical philosophy nor Christian theology has asked our question about the meaning of history as the decisive scene of human existence and destiny. For the Greek historian history was governed by the laws of human nature, while Greek philosophers investigated that which is permanent.

For the Christian faith history is not an autonomous realm of human endeavor and progress but a realm of sin and death, and therefore in need of redemption. Within both perspectives the historical progress could not be experienced as all-important. The belief in the absolute relevance of history as such is the result of the emancipation of the modern historical consciousness from the foundation in and limitation by classical cosmology and Christian theology. Both restricted the experience of history and prevented its growing to indefinite dimensions.

Nothing in the New Testament warrants a conception of the new events that constituted early Christianity as the beginning of a new epoch of secular developments within a continuous process. For the early Christians the history of this world had rather come to an end, and Jesus himself was seen by them not as a world-historical link in the chain of historical happenings but as the unique redeemer. What really begins with the appearance of Jesus Christ is not a new epoch of secular history, called "Christian," but the beginning of an end. The Christian times are Christian only insofar as they are the last time. Because the Kingdom of God, moreover, is not to be realized in a continuous process of historical development, the eschatological history of salvation also cannot impart a new and progressive meaning to the history of the world, which is fulfilled by having reached its term. The "meaning" of the history of this world is fulfilled against itself because the story of salvation, as embodied in Jesus Christ, redeems and dismantles, as it were, the hopeless history of the world. In the perspective of the New Testament the history of the world entered into the eschatological substance of its unworldly message only insofar as the first generations after Christ were still involved in it, but without being of it.

Thus, if we venture to say that our modern historical consciousness is derived from Christianity, this can mean only that the eschatological outlook of the New Testament has opened the perspective toward a future fulfillment – originally beyond, and eventually within, historical existence. In consequence of the Christian consciousness we have a historical consciousness which is as Christian by derivation as it is non-Christian by consequence, because it lacks the belief that Christ is the beginning of an end and his life and death the final answer to an otherwise insoluble question. If we understand, as we must, Christianity in the sense of the New Testament and history in our modern sense, that is, as a continuous process of human action and secular develop-

ments, a "Christian history" is non-sense. The only, though weighty, excuse for this inconsistent compound of a Christian history is to be found in the fact that the history of the world has continued its course of sin and death in spite of the eschatological event, message, and consciousness. The world after Christ has assimilated the Christian perspective toward a goal and fulfillment and, at the same time, has discarded the living faith in an imminent *eschaton*. If the modern mind, concerned with the preservation and advance of the existing society, feels only the impracticability of such an eschatological outlook, it forgets that for the founders of the Christian religion, to whom the collapse of society was certain and imminent, it was, instead, practical good sense which dictated such a concentration upon ultimate issues and a corresponding indifference toward intermediate stages of worldly happenings.

The primitive faith of the early Christians believed that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and the early Christians were therefore unconcerned with the process and progress of the history of this world. The sophisticated faith of modern Christians is primarily concerned with the disorderly history of this world when confronting it ultimately with faith. Since the establishment of the Christian Church in the history of this world, the Christian faith has had to face the unbelief or the false beliefs of the world. The "and" between Faith and History indicates the problem of the relation between faith in things unseen and visible world history.

The primary question is, however, not how to answer a fixed question but how to pose the question itself. The answer which Niebuhr works out when asking about the relation between history and faith is predetermined by a question which implies that history and faith are *correlated as something provisional to something ultimate*. The Christian faith offers an answer to history at large and to the "special problems of our age." Hence follwos the apologetic purpose of Niebuhr's book, which is, however, not a dogmatic defense against unbelief and false belief; rather it is itself essentially involved in the actual history of our world and in a historic perspective. Niebuhr is aware of the impossibility of erecting a "philosophy of history" on the foundation of faith, yet he attempts a Christian interpretation of history, taking history in the ordinary, non-theological sense of the word.

The apologetic purpose is carried through by an analysis of three approaches to the problem of history: Greek classical thought (which

he dismisses as having no permanent relevance); Jewish-Christian faith; and the modern belief in history as such, that is, the assumption that the growth of man's power and freedom, in which Niebuhr also believes, will gradually resolve every human perplexity and eventually an indefinite progress will redeem history by itself. Niebuhr holds that there are obvious truths (in the plural) about life and history, discovered by modern sciences, and "provisional meanings" which, however, make sense only if they become completed and superseded by the final truth and meaning (in the singular), which is apprehended by faith. The modern, dynamic, and progressive view of history is, therefore, more closely related to the Christian sense of history than to the a-historical spirituality of Oriental and Greek thinking. Both the classical and the modern approach are inadequate, for the first reduces history "too simply" to natural recurrences and tragic fate, whereas the second is betrayed into illusions about the human situation which involves both a creature and a creator whose freedom is creative as well as destructive. The Christian faith prevents these provisional meanings from becoming absolutes and man's freedom from becoming *hybris*.

The revelation of Christ and faith in God's redemptive purpose are defined as both the fulfillment and the negation of all partial meanings in history, as they are "embodied" in national, imperial, and world-wide cultural destinies. In Niebuhr's presentation, the perplexing problem of how the Christian story of salvation is embodied in the history of the world seems to be resolved in a dialectical balance between the common experience of visible history and the individual experience of faith in things unseen by the rather conventional and unexamined assertion that there are "facets of the eternal in the flux of time." Tangents of moral meaning in history are supposed to point toward a supra-historical center. Being assured of this center of meaning and orientation by a faith which reduces the doctrine of creation, incarnation, resurrection, and consummation to mere "symbols" (which have, however, to be taken "seriously" but which would be embarrassing when taken literally), Niebuhr has little difficulty in asserting the superiority of the Christian interpretation: it is above the alternatives of despair and complacency, evolutionary optimism and defeatism, secularism and escapism, pietistic sectarianism and Catholic institutionalism, worldliness and asceticism, and so on. The Christian interpretation of history is more adequate than alternative interpretations because it is dialectically more comprehensive: "it comprehends all of life's anti-

nomies and contradictions into a system of meaning." One wonders whether this criterion of the superiority of the Christian interpretation is not rather Hegelian than Christian. And if pride is sin, then this is the intellectual sin of dialectical comprehensiveness–that it cannot help being always superior to the too simple alternatives which will only one thing.

Faith and History leaves one with the general impression that the limits of man's virtue, wisdom, and power and the unresolved questions of the human enterprise exist only to be answered and completed by faith and religion. But one may question if the task of Christian apologetic is not "too simply" conceived, if it is worked out in this manner. For why should not the contradictions and ambiguities of our historical enterprise have to be endured with mature resignation instead of overcome and resolved "ultimately"? If, since Kant, philosophers make room for faith by subjecting the competence of reason to a philosophical criticism, they do not pretend to know the ultimate truth by revelation and faith. If theologians try to establish the truth of the Christian Gospel "at the very limits of all systems of meaning", and as the completion of provisional half-truths and meanings, they will have to demonstrate the validity of their apologetic on more than dialectic grounds.

Niebuhr distinguishes a negative and a positive apologetic task. The first consists in demonstrating that all worldly wisdom – be it optimistic or pessimistic, emphasizing either the dignity or the misery of man– gives an inadequate view of the total human situation. This "negative proof of the Christian truth" (it is actually only an intimation of its desirability) cannot be transmuted into a positive one. If there is a positive one, it must consist in "correlating" the truth apprehended by faith and repentance to truths about life and history gained in human experience. But the truth of faith, says Niebuhr, is incapable of simple correlation with any system of worldly experience. It cannot be explicated rationally in any worldly validation. The perfect goodness of Christ was validated by an obvious defeat in history, and no nation has ever been a saintly martyrnation. But how can one then assert provisional meanings in the historical destinies of national and world-wide civilizations? And how can one simply say that the Biblical faith "must" be fruitful of genuine renewals of life in the historic, collective, human enterprise? Is human "life" at all identical with "history", and responsibility for one's neighbor with responsibility for history? And is respon-

sibility at all an ultimate religious and not only a moral category? There is in man's attitude toward his fellow men a very real dialectic between quantity and quality which Niebuhr ignores because he conceives of history as a mere extension of human life and freedom, in spite of his insight that the realization of Christian love not only does not extend man's historic potentialities but makes historic survival evenmore problematic, "for it points to the fact that the highest form of human goodness embodies a heedlessness of self which endangers the self in its physical security." And yet Niebuhr insists that it is necessary to "incorporate" what is true in the modern discovery of a development in history into the final truth of the Christian Gospel. Thus, the intellectual power and versatility of *Faith and History* leave us with a profound ambiguity: the author of the book shares neither the modern, now obsolete, faith in history as such, nor the ancient faith in that Christ with whom the time was fulfilled, but makes an attempt to salvage by means of a liberal faith in symbols some fragments of the modern but shaken belief in the meaningfulness and purposefulness of the historical process.

Our critical thesis by which we judged Niebuhr's attempt to determine the "and" between "Faith and History" which separates God's redemptive purpose from the human adventure called history can be substantiated by a brief survey of some typical Christian positions with regard to the process of history. Those who have faith in Christ do not believe in the ultimate or provisional meaningfulness of history; rather they feel the radical *disproportion* between the history of the world and the succession of faith as implied in the story of the great flood.

The New Testament contains only one explicit reference to the world's history: it separates strictly what we owe to Caesar from what we owe to God. St. Paul develops for the first time a sort of theology of history by interpreting the succession of Gentiles as the providential fulfillment of the religious history of the Jews. This progress from the unbelieving Jews to the believing Gentiles refers, however, not to the process and progress of secular history but to the succession of faith. Augustine interprets the history of the world in relation to the purpose of God. The city of God and the city of Earth sometimes meet, but the story of salvation is, in principle, separated from the history of the world as truth *(veritas)* from vanity *(vanitas)* or faith from unbelief. Thomas does not deal at all with the historical process but follows instead the classical tradition by asking about the just political order,

the justice of which cannot be understood historically but only morally and religiously. Luther compares the ups and downs of history with the vicissitudes of a tournament and its changing fortunes. Historically acting men are only "God's memory". To look behind the curtain of the visible scene of history in order to discover the real causes of the growth and decline of empires and nations is not a concern of faith in God's inscrutable will. When Melanchthon defended the cause of the reformation before the emperor, he was deeply disturbed about the possible historical consequences of his decisions. Luther wrote to him: "You are irritated by the unpredictable issue because it is beyound your grasp of understanding. But if you were able to understand it, I would not like to have any part in it and even less to be its head. God has put our cause under a viewpoint which you cannot realize by your rhetoric and philosophy, That is, on faith alone to which all things are subjected which are invisible and do not appear to the eyes. Those who try to make them visible, apparent, and intelligible will only earn distress." Faith cannot be represented to the world in terms of history but only in and by faith itself, regardless of the historical consequences which no man can anticipate and judge. Pascal's *Pensées* contain a single sentence on history: "The history of the church should rather be called the history of truth", for it seemed to him self-evident that true history is nothing else than the story of salvation as preached by the Church. The work of Kierkegaard is one coherent criticism of Hegel's identification of Christian faith and philosophical reason manifesting itself in the history of the world and of Christianity as a world-wide religion. Finally, a statement of K. Barth: "The story of salvation is not merely *one* story or the guiding thread within the tissue of all other stories, but the only authentical history which embraces all the others insofar as the story of salvation manifests itself in the others by way of hints or intimations".

All these Christian thinkers from the first century to the twentieth have, of course, experienced history even as we do, but none of them has tried to explicate the story of salvation in terms of the world's history. If it were possible to explicate the event of Christ in history and as history, this would imply the cancellation of the fundamental difference between the will of God and the will of man.

All that can be said in favor of relating the one to the other "history" is that, for the believer, profane history may have the character of a sign, visibly intimating that which is known only to faith in things unseen.

Thus historical catastrophes can be interpreted as intimations of the last judgment, though the latter cannot be comprehended in terms of historical disasters. Theodor Haecker wrote in his diary of 1939–1945: "For the Christian believer there can be no doubt that the significance of external happenings can be shockingly different. By significance I understand the varying proximity or distance of the history of the world to the ›history‹ of the kingdom of God. A Christian cannot share Ranke's opinion that all epochs are equidistant from God. Or can one deny that Rome under Augustus, Palestine under Herod and Pilate were more intimately related to the story of salvation than Europe under Napoleon? [...] That our present history has such an intimate relation to the story of salvation, this belief many will share with me."

Even such a cautious statement is open to criticism, for the major proximity of "Rome under Augustus" to "Christ" is only historically a real proximity. From the viewpoint of faith, however, it is yet a semblance because the relation of the story of salvation to the history of the world cannot be fixed and defined by faith. The factual coincidence of Rome under Augustus with Christ does not exclude the possibility that God could have revealed himself a thousand years earlier or two thousand years later in Europe under Napoleon or in Russia under Stalin or in Germany under Hitler. And since the story of salvation does not refer to historical empires, nations, and civilizations but to each human soul, one cannot dismiss the thought that Christianity, that is, faith in Christ, is essentially indifferent over against world-historical differences, even over against the difference between civilization and barbarism. Both reveal under different circumstances the same human nature, though man appears better than he really is if orderly and civilized conditions do not put him to the test. Even atomic warfare would not change what human nature essentially is. "It will only put an end to a globe which we always knew was doomed to a bad end in any case. I am not sure that it would not be typical of human history if assuming that the world was bound some day to cease to be a possible habitation for living creatures – men should by their own contrivance hasten that end and anticipate the operation of nature or of time – because it is so much in the character of Divine judgement in history that men are made to execute it upon themselves."[1]

1 H. Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 66.

The missing link between "Faith *and* History" is perhaps something very positive because it is the Christian faith (as well as philosophical skepticism) which gives us that elasticity of mind which frees us from the historicism which is the typical dogmatism and obsession of our time. A wise historian and a Christian (something different from a "Christian historian") concludes his study on Christianity and History with the sentence: "Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted." It is more than doubtful whether a philosopher can offer an equally firm principle over against the predicament of human history. But even a philosopher may agree with Butterfied's sober statement that "when all is as remote as the table of Troy, we are able at last perhaps to be a little sorry for everybody".